

Adapting to a WFH world

They say you should not let a good crisis go to waste. Cities around the world, from Britain and France to Ontario in Canada, have been busy reconfiguring their city centres, using the opportunity provided by the drop in commuter traffic to increase space for walking, cycling and outdoor activity.

Australian cities have been slow following this trend.

There are positive steps in the form of additional protected bike lanes and pop-up street furniture in central Melbourne, even if this is no match for - say - the designation of a vast area of central Paris for restricted car access, that has fostered an unprecedented cycling boom.

American commentator Megan McArdle, in the Washington Post [on 13 February](#), highlighted the

challenge posed for city centres by the global retreat from office work.

And yet she was dismissive of the concrete steps cities are taking, saying they “often seem to be recycling long-term items from progressive wish lists rather than addressing the looming crisis”.

Understanding the logic of these post-COVID measures means looking beyond the current tendency to turn everything into a left-right culture war.

These are no Zoom-era fads: they’ve been pursued (albeit piecemeal) for decades with the persistent support of communities and planning experts alike around the world.

Every developed world city after World War II faced the challenge of rising car use and (initially)

decline in popularity of alternatives - some cities meeting this challenge more successfully than others.

Melbourne is an extreme case of a radical inversion of transport habits: from a city averaging more than one public transport trip per person per weekday in 1950, to barely one-fifth of that a generation later.

Car use grew at more than double the rate of population growth for decades, while public transport use has only returned to 1950s levels in absolute terms in the past decade.

Now the fear is public transport is back in the doldrums, due to the lingering effects of the pandemic.

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Cranbourne line finally duplicated

It took 27 years, but the Cranbourne line is finally duplicated.

The line was originally part of the South Gippsland railway. After that closed in 1993, Dandenong to Cranbourne was electrified and became part of the suburban network in 1995 - but was mostly single track, leading to limited services in peak, and frequent delays.

With strong residential growth in the area, improvements are key,

and completion of duplication on the line is very welcome.

A new timetable took effect in mid-February, adding extra services at peak times, with trains now about every 10 minutes.

New Evolution HCMT trains are also coming into service on the Cranbourne and Pakenham lines, adding capacity.

These upgrades help ensure the Metro tunnel will run efficiently once it opens in 2025, with trains running through to Sunbury and eventually the airport.

There is more for the government to do.

Train frequencies outside peak times will need to be boosted for the tunnel to more effectively replace the busy St Kilda Road/Swanston Street tram corridor for most trips. 20-30 minute waits between trains will not allow the Metro tunnel to reach its potential.

With urban growth to the west and south-east of Melbourne, extensions of the line to Clyde in the south-east, and electrification and track expansion to Melton will also be important to keep up.

More electric buses arriving soon

New bus operator Kinetic took over running of Transdev routes in January, and is set to introduce 36 electric buses by 2025, with another 300 to follow in coming years.

Initially they will be run from depots at Sunshine West and Heatherton.

The state government says that apart from reducing emissions, they will also offer a smoother ride for passengers. They have pledged that from 2025, all new buses coming into service will be zero-emissions.

The government has also aimed to boost Melbourne bus patronage to 200 million per year by 2030. While a new electric bus fleet will mean a cleaner ride, only more frequent and more direct bus services will ensure that more passengers get on board.



Electric bus livery designs from a PTV online poll

We'd prefer a design that doesn't block the windows, on a bus route with frequent services all day.

Feds scrap car parks

Federal Treasurer Josh Frydenberg announced in early March that plans for four station car park expansions in inner-suburban Melbourne had been scrapped.

Promised in the lead-up to the 2019 Federal election, \$65 million was to have been spent at Canterbury, Surrey Hills, Camberwell and Glenferrie for up to 2000 spaces.

The pledges were heavily criticised by Federal Labor and by others, with the scheme being the

subject of a scathing Federal Auditor General's report in 2021.

While many have criticised the lack of scrutiny that led to the funding, the bigger problem was that large scale park and ride projects are simply illogical for these inner suburban locations.

Locals wised up to the problems, and opposition to the projects was fierce, with many protesting against the construction of multi-storey car parks that would have dominated neighbourhood streetscapes and added to traffic congestion at peak commuting times.

At a cost of \$32,000 or more per car space, ultimately there are smarter, cheaper, more efficient ways of getting people to railway stations.

Media reports noted that most of the other projects proposed in 2019 either have no timeline, or have already been scrapped – but they do still have funding.

It's time for the Federal Government to step away entirely from these projects, and provide transport funding based on need, not politics.

Contact the PTUA

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PTUA email lists and archived newsletters online:
ptua.org.au/members/resources

PTUA members can obtain cheap yearly Myki Passes – see
ptua.org.au/members/offers

PTUA member meetings

Geelong and Ballarat branch meetings are currently paused.

Other meetings as advertised in member emails and on our web site:
ptua.org.au/members/meetings

Social media

You can follow us on social media to stay up to date with public transport issues in Melbourne and around Victoria.

Twitter: [@ptua](https://twitter.com/ptua)
Facebook: fb.com/ptua.vic
Instagram: ptua.vic
LinkedIn:
linkedin.com/company/ptua

www.ptua.org.au

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Our thanks to Margaret Pullar and the dedicated mailout team.

Sustainable Cities campaign

Laura Sykes, who has served as the Coordinator of the Sustainable Cities campaign since mid-2021, has announced that she will be moving onto another role towards the end of March.

Laura has done an incredible job with the Better Buses campaign, working with volunteers and stakeholders to get the message out there, despite the difficulties of lockdowns.

A large part of this work has been with community groups and individuals in Melbourne's west, and the recent government press release being headlined "Melbourne's West The Home of New Electric Buses" is testament to how effective that work has been. (See page 2)

We thank Laura for her time with the campaign and wish her the best for her next move.

⇒ melbournefoe.org.au/transport

Cities & PT: adapting to a WFH world

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As one news report after another has stated, when Melbourne achieved 'zero COVID' for a few precious months at the start of 2021, the rate of public transport use only reverted to around half its previous level, even while road traffic volumes and general 'mobility indices' compiled by 'big data' aggregators suggested travel was back near pre-COVID levels.

The widely accepted conclusion was there had been a shift from public transport to car use, due to fear of infection.

But closer consideration reveals there's likely been little actual mode shift at all - just a selective change in work habits.

Melbourne's public transport use is generally known to be CBD-centric, but hard statistics reveal just how skewed the picture is relative to car use and travel in general.

Data from the (pre-pandemic) VISTA survey shows that around 70% of public transport use is for work and study, compared with other reasons for travel such as shopping, social visits or other personal business.

Yet less than half of travel overall is for work or study purposes, and the pattern of car use closely follows this.

The greatest disparity appears when looking at the destinations of work trips. As Chris Loader's [Charting Transport blog](#) has documented, fully 75% of all journeys to work on public transport are to workplaces within just 4km of Melbourne GPO. Meanwhile, of journeys to work by car, 86% are to

workplaces greater than 4km from the GPO.

This vast gulf between purposes and destinations of 'typical' public transport and car trips in Melbourne makes public transport uniquely vulnerable to shifts in CBD commuting. One can readily calculate that if everyone with a workplace 4km or less from the GPO decides to work from home 3 days per week, that is enough to reduce public transport use Melbourne-wide by over 30%.

Car use in the same scenario drops by only 4%. If those workers decide to work from home permanently - as many did even in early 2021 - public transport use for all purposes drops by half, while car use drops only by 6%.

The numbers obtained even from this simple back-of-the-envelope exercise are a remarkably good fit with the observed figures for the first half of 2021.

This suggests a much bigger problem than 'fear of public transport' in the COVID-normal era is a limited concept of public transport's role in a vast city like Melbourne.

As 'working from anywhere' removes the necessity of commuting, it has profound consequences both for cities and for their transport systems.

The lesson for cities is the one being heeded in Paris, Berlin and elsewhere. Office workers now need a reason to go back to the office, and 'liveability' is a business critical consideration for CBD employers. Unless both the commute and the destination are attractive, employers that provide 'work from anywhere' flexibility will simply steal the workforce from employers that don't, and

city centres will go into decline. Importantly, when workers themselves are asked what makes them least inclined to return, a poor travel experience is the most common answer given.

The lesson for public transport is one that most European and Asian cities learned already, when meeting the challenge posed by the motor car in the postwar era. Australia's transport systems need to evolve beyond a single-minded focus on nine-to-five CBD workers and provide turn-up-and-go service all day, every day. Otherwise, the economics of moving those very workers will deteriorate.

For decades Melbourne's had a poor record of adequate public transport provision in new suburban growth areas, or indeed anywhere beyond the inner-city tram network.

It's not that inner suburbs are especially more dense than middle or outer suburbs, or that the people are instinctively more fond of public transport or walking: it's that as soon as cars appeared, the received view of what is an 'essential service' ceased to include provision for any other kind of transport at all.

If that doesn't change now, working from home will still mean getting stuck in traffic any time someone needs to leave the house.

This article is adapted from a presentation by PTUA President Dr Tony Morton to the Victorian Transport Infrastructure Conference on 24 February 2022.

⇒ vicinfrastructure.com.au

Geelong branch

ABC surveys locals

Erin Cooper, one of two journalists at the ABC office in Geelong, which has had a rather uncertain presence here for a few years, got in touch with our convener recently.

They were planning to present a segment on public transport in Geelong, and Erin wanted to get our perspectives on the system. She is from Hobart, so is not unfamiliar with the nature of the problems we encounter with our bus system.

Added to that, when she first moved to Geelong a few months ago, she was living in Highton and was, unfortunately, reliant on the Route 43 bus. The Highton section of that route features one of the indirect, “magical mystery tour” routes that are so off-putting to potential passengers.

As part of their preparation for the program, the ABC’s Geelong office conducted an informal survey of Geelong public transport users via comments on their Facebook Page, and our convener was interviewed at the Moorabool Street bus stops. The segment was aired on Sunday 6 March, as part of an ABC News focus on Geelong.

PT fares rise

After a pause last year, fares rose in January by 2.3% on average.

This puts the daily fare for Zone 1 or Zones 1+2 at \$9.20. This is exactly double the Zone 1 Daily fare in the year 2000, when it was \$4.60.

So for Zone 1 passengers, they have seen fares go up by 100% in

G21 survey

A number of PTUA members contributed to a recent online survey organised by the consultants engaged by G21 to help develop a transport plan for the Geelong region.

The motivation to develop the plan arose from the fact that the previous G21 public transport plan had been implemented over five years ago

It was decided that the new plan should have a wider scope than just public transport, on the basis that all transport modes must work together.

It was hard to argue against that, but it meant the focus on public transport was lost. As well, the new plan will be much more complex and provide more opportunities for criticism and subsequent inaction.

The results of the survey clearly showed a preference for a plan which prioritises sustainable transport over cars. However, translating people’s general preferences into concrete and useful actions is the hard part, and that is yet to come.

Fast(er) rail

A recent article in The Age, “revealing” the actual nature of

the so-called Geelong fast rail project, reflected what we have been saying all along.

The current proposal, which includes sending some trains via Werribee on a new third track from there to Laverton, will mean some Geelong-Melbourne trains will be very slightly faster.

Not only was the original federal government promise of a 32-minute end-to-end journey unworkable, it was totally unnecessary.

What we and the vast majority of Geelong line passengers want is a rail service that has more frequency, reliability and capacity.

Buses

Our convener recently met Geelong councillor, Sarah Mansfield, who wanted to discuss the bus system, particularly the Moorabool Street stops, given that the council rejected the DoT’s Central Geelong Transport Network Operating Plan a couple of years ago.

There is persistent pressure from some powerful sources to move bus routes and stops away from convenient central locations.

that time, against inflation of about 70%.

V/Line fares have also risen, with anomalies as you travel across Melbourne zone boundaries continuing to be a problem.

For example, a passenger travelling from Southern Cross to Lara will pay just \$4.60 one way. But the peak fare for just an extra 4 stops to Geelong station is triple that amount at \$13.80.

There are similar issues on other V/Line routes.

We are hopeful that the new Myki contract (see page 6) will provide an opportunity for the Government to resolve these anomalies.

The future of Myki

The current Myki ticketing contract expires in 2023, and the State Government has opened Expressions Of Interest to find a new operator.

In recent months, PTUA has met with some companies interested in winning the contract, which has enabled us to highlight passenger views on the highs and lows of Myki, and how the system can be improved.

The government has said they expect improvements to include an expansion of smartphone options to include iPhone, and fare payment using credit cards.

Behind the scenes it's likely that this will involve a switch to an account-based system - in contrast to how Myki works at the moment, which is card-based - that is, the card is the point of reference.

Companies we've spoken to agree that even with credit card and smartphone options, a card needs to be an option for people who have neither.

And while credit card and smartphone payment means less

requirement to manually top-up a Myki card, some people will still prefer to use that method.

Some people will also prefer to travel anonymously, without having to register a card or link their travel to a phone or bank account.

Other ticketing improvements seem likely to include:

- Coverage of the entire state, not just the "commuter" routes
- Weekly fare caps to replace the confusing system of pre-purchasing a weekly Pass
- Fixing of Myki's quirks such as the slow and inconsistent card touch times

Factors we hope are also being considered are V/Line fare anomalies, potential removal of the Free Tram Zone, and automatic compensation from train and tram operators, rather than making passengers manually claim it.

So do we get a new ticketing system? Sort of.

A new operator is likely to run their own software, preferably

continuing to use the existing ticketing equipment around the network. But if that's not possible, there might be a large-scale replacement of at least some of that equipment.

Either way, it's possible that the government will de-emphasise the change by not changing the ticketing system's name, continuing to call it Myki. We'll see.

If there is a big change to the ticket system, but the name remains, it may not be readily obvious to the casual observer. Indications are that any new operator would seek to migrate existing passengers (and their tickets) seamlessly over onto the new system.

The key for passengers is that they deliver on the aim of a transition with minimal disruption - unlike the protracted Myki rollout ten years ago. Certainly the prospective bidders are taking this view - this may reflect that some of them this time are far more experienced in running public transport ticketing than the original Myki operator.



Ballarat branch

Another station for Ballarat?

With talk of Victoria hosting the Commonwealth Games, and Ballarat's Mars Stadium potentially hosting athletics events, there has been renewed interest in how we can get spectators to the stadium by public transport.

A railway station for V/Line services would be a great way to achieve this.

But if we're going to build a station to bring people to the venue, we have to think about how that station would serve the community once the Games are over.

It's great that we get AFL games a few times a year, but that's not enough on its own – we need a station that will work for Ballaratians 365 days a year.

Putting a station across Creswick

Road from the stadium, on the Maryborough Line, is problematic for a number of reasons. It's close to the stadium, but very little else that would attract passengers – it's surrounded by a quarry, a golf course, and low-density industrial land.

Most people will walk up to 1km to a railway station, but there's not much housing within 1km of this site.

It's also a big headache operationally. If we have Wendouree Station on the Ararat Line, and this new station on the Maryborough Line, that means half of the trains arriving at Ballarat Station need to go one way and half need to go the other.

This means both stations would get half the frequency – meaning 80 minute waits between trains. Lots of people would choose to drive to Ballarat Station instead, to take advantage of its higher frequencies, which means more pressure on car parks in the city

centre.

By contrast, a station just south of the stadium on the Ararat Line – somewhere near Burnbank Street – would still be very well-placed to serve the stadium, comparable to the walk from Richmond Station to the MCG.

But it would also have plenty of housing within range, and would even serve the eastern end of the Howitt Street retail strip. It would also avoid those operational problems – it could be served by every single train without cutting Wendouree's frequency.

A station on the Ararat Line might be slightly more expensive and technically challenging to build in the first place, but it would be exponentially more useful for the decades afterwards. And when we're thinking about the legacy of Commonwealth Games investment in Ballarat, we really need to be thinking long-term.



New patronage data released

After lagging behind other states, the Department of Transport has finally started publishing regular public transport patronage data.

Until now, the only official release of this information was in the State Budget Papers, which only provided an annual total.

Particularly in the context of the ups and (lock)downs of the pandemic, annual data is pretty meaningless, so it's pleasing that DOT has commenced publishing monthly data – even if it is lagging by a few months.

The initial release includes patronage by mode from January 2018 to September 2021. After the “normal” years of 2018 and 2019, the effect of the pandemic is very clear, with patronage taking a dive from March 2020 onwards.

Following the protracted lockdowns of 2020, there was some recovery in early 2021, but by September, patronage had collapsed again.

Tram, Metro and V/Line patronage suffered the most, with the nadir being in August 2020.

That month, tram was just 6.9% of the August 2019 figure; Metro 8.3%; V/Line slightly higher at 11.2%. Metropolitan buses were higher again at 15.6%, regional coaches 16.5%, and regional (town) buses 26.9%.

Throughout, it appears that modes mostly concentrated on Melbourne CBD have had the biggest drops, reflecting the high proportion of CBD white-collar workers who have been working from home – and how focussed the public transport network is on serving that market.

With CBD commuting perhaps having changed forever, it underscores the point that public

transport must adapt to travel demand to help recover.

Other data just released includes up-to-date station-by-station usage numbers.

This comes after bus punctuality data was published for the first time last year.

It's pleasing to see the Department release more information into the public realm, and we can only encourage them to continue to publish more of it.

More regular updates would be welcome, as would more detail, for instance weekly rather than monthly – given that different months have different numbers of weekdays and weekends, making close comparisons difficult.

After all, we all pay for the transport system – we should all be able to see how it's performing.

